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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 000351

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STATE PASS USAID FOR ANE: AFERRARA DMCLUSKEY
STATE ALSO PASS USTR EBRYAN
BANGKOK FOR USAID

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [OREP](#) [EAID](#) [ETRD](#) [PHUM VM](#) [HUMANR](#) [RELFREE](#) [HIV](#) [AIDS](#)
SUBJECT: STAFFDEL FLICKNER'S TRIP TO VIETNAM

1. SUMMARY: During Staffdel Flickner's visit to Vietnam January 10-15, the delegation met with the Office of the Government (OOG), during which its Vice Minister expressed his appreciation for U.S. assistance, requested continued support, and asked for continued dialogue on human rights and religious freedom. The Staffdel also visited USAID development partners and projects in Hanoi, Da Nang, and Ho Chi Minh City. END SUMMARY.

2. A Congressional staff delegation from the House Appropriations Committee (HAC) led by Charles Flickner, Clerk of the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, visited Vietnam January 10-15 to review U.S. foreign assistance programs. The delegation also included John Blazey, HAC Professional Staff Member, and Paul Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for Legislative Affairs. The stop in

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Hanoi followed a visit to Da Nang and preceded a separate stop in Ho Chi Minh City, where they visited assistance projects. In Hanoi, the Staffdel met with OOG Vice Minister Nguyen Quoc Huy, as well as representatives of USAID-funded projects, the American Chamber of Commerce, the United Nations Development Program, and the Vice Chairwoman of the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee.

3. After commenting on the recent improvements in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship, OOG Vice Minister Huy recognized the active participation of the U.S. Congress in this positive development. He further stated that he appreciated U.S. technical assistance, which he termed "efficient." Among other responsibilities, VM Huy chairs the GVN steering committee for the USAID-funded Support for Trade Acceleration (STAR) project. This program, which assists forty-two central and local government offices to implement the GVN's commitments under the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA), works on a demand-driven basis, with the steering committee prioritizing requests for assistance. Although this process could become burdensome, VM Huy praised its efficiency. (Note: Through the STAR project's assistance to the GVN in implementing the BTA, it is helping to write or re-write Vietnamese laws and, among other things, increase the system's transparency, improve rule of law, and create a level playing field for U.S. companies. For further discussion on this subject, see septel on Staffdel McCormick. End Note.)

4. Given the success of this program, the GVN has requested that it be broadened and deepened, he said. Specifically, during Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan's recent meeting at USAID Washington, to which VM Huy accompanied him, a preliminary agreement was reached to extend STAR to 2005 and create a new project on accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). According to VM Huy, Vietnam's seventh WTO working party was successful, with many participants supporting Vietnam's accession bid. (Note: VM Huy attended the working party, as did Econ/C. End Note.) VM Huy assured the delegation of Vietnam's active preparation for the next round and reasserted Vietnam's stated goal of acceding to the WTO in 2005. Towards this goal, VM Huy requested technical assistance in WTO negotiations and Congressional influence on the USTR to have sympathy regarding Vietnam's bid as a developing country. He further stated that the GVN would like the U.S. to send a delegation to Vietnam for WTO bilateral negotiations. Following accession, the GVN would ask for U.S. assistance in implementing its WTO commitments, including work on amending the country's legal system.

5. Maintaining that the GVN values all U.S. assistance, VM Huy suggested two specific next steps for cooperation. First, he asked that a Bilateral Agreement for Economic and Technical Cooperation be signed between the U.S. and Vietnam. Second, he suggested that U.S. and Vietnam negotiate an agreement that would outline a long-term, stable future for the relationship including official exchanges and consultation between officials. Such a

mechanism would encourage the development of an enduring, deep trust and the formation of common strategies. The delegation responded that it would forward these suggestions to the appropriate officials in Washington. (Note: Embassy is about to begin negotiations with the GVN on a bilateral agreement on economic, technical and humanitarian assistance.)

16. The Staffdel also highlighted the need to resume a dialogue on human rights and religious freedom in order to ensure continued U.S. technical assistance. In response, VM Huy stated that the GVN wants an open, "equitable" discussion with the USG on these issues as well as more Congressional visits in order to compare actual conditions with reports. He asserted that Vietnam has twenty million religious believers and that the number of followers is increasing. However, those who "abuse" religion for other purposes must be punished, VM Huy said.

17. In Da Nang, the delegation had the opportunity to visit World Concern Development Organization's (WCDO) vocational training for adolescents with disabilities program. WCDO has been operating in Vietnam with USAID assistance since the mid 1990's. The members traveled to three informal training sites, where employers receive a small stipend and support to train adolescents with hearing and mobility impairments in various vocations. The visits included one seamstress who is hearing impaired, one hairdresser/makeup artist who was paralyzed from polio, and two disadvantaged youth who are learning TV repair. The very employers who have trained these young students often hire them.

18. In Ho Chi Minh City, the delegation met with representatives of the city's HIV/AIDS Committee. They described a situation where cases were rising dramatically, with nearly 1 percent of pregnant women at the city's primary maternity hospital testing positive for HIV and 3.4 percent of new military recruits. These numbers are much higher than for the country overall. They noted that while the local committee was bringing together various agencies to try to deal with the problem, their resources were extremely limited. For example, no funding was currently available for anti-retroviral drug treatments for HIV-positive individuals.

19. The delegation also visited a rehabilitation center for young drug addicts where 1500 youth are serving two-year terms. While the group did not tour the entire facility, the areas that they saw were clean and well maintained, and they observed residents working and engaging in various vocational training activities. The delegation indicated that for a group of drug addicts, the residents looked surprisingly healthy. Not surprisingly, HIV/AIDS is an issue here as well. Officials estimate that about 50 percent of the center's population is HIV positive. Testing is done on a random basis and residents are not advised of their status. Local officials claim that they follow this policy because they worry that anyone known to be HIV positive would have trouble integrating into the center's population and eventually into society. When asked by the delegation if condoms were provided to the young residents of the facility, the warden answered that since sexual activity was not permitted at the center, condoms were not distributed and were unnecessary.

10. This cable was cleared by Charles Flickner.
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